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ABSTRACT

Two learning assistance (LA) centres in suburban elementary schools in British Columbia (Canada) were studied via a participant-observer approach to examine the changing role of the LA teacher, the impact on the school staff of more remediation in the regular classroom, and the concerns held by LA teachers and regular classroom teachers regarding the collaborative/consultation model. This document draws on study data collected from multiple sources to examine how well the integrated model was being accepted and how the LA teacher's role is changing, particularly with respect to: (1) support to teachers as they cope with an increased workload; (2) integration of the emotional and learning needs of the whole child; and (3) continuing to address specific skill needs. Overall, study results suggest that LA and regular teachers need support in terms of time for consulting; sharing of ideas, responsibilities, and decisions; and adjusting to new demands and pressures. Ongoing inservice training and recognition of the demanding nature of the teachers' roles were other needs pinpointed. Suggestions for future research on consulting and on the collaborative/consultation model conclude the document. Included are two tables. (14 references) (CLA)

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Anatomy of a Learning Assistance Centre

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RUNNING HEAD: Anatomy of a Learning Assistance Centre

This research will be reported at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association in Chicago,Illinois, 1991.
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Abstract

This case study of two learning assistance centres was designed to examine in detail the changing role of the learning assistance teacher, the impact on the school staff of more remediation taking place in the regular classroom, and the concerns about the collaborative/consultation model held by learning assistance and regular classroom teachers. Specifically, the research questions investigated were: How is the learning assistance teachers' role changing? Is the collaborative/consultative model being accepted by members of the school staff? Do the learning assistance teachers and class teachers have concerns that need to be addressed? Data were collected by examining all relevant learning assistance centre paperwork, observing LA teachers' daily work, conducting interviews, and analysing responses to a questionnaire administered to classroom teachers and administrators. Overall, this examination of the collaborative/consultation model suggests that learning assistance and regular teachers need both support and consideration if they are to meet the challenges of their changing role. They need support in terms of time: Time for consulting, sharing ideas, responsibilities, and decisions, as well as time to adjust to new demands and pressures. And, they need consideration in terms of ongoing inservice training and recognition of the demanding nature of their roles. Suggestions for the direction of future research into consulting and the collaborative/consultative model are made.

Anatomy of a Learning Assistance Centre

A learning assistance centre or resource room has been the educational intensive-care unit in all elementary schools. It is the on-site location for the coordination and provision of special and remedial instruction for students who experience problems in learning. Recently, a noticeable shift has occurred in the site of provision of special instructional service; namely from the learning assistance centre to the classroom. With increasing emphasis being placed on educating learning disabled and other handicapped students in the regular classroom, both regular and special teachers have had to consult and problem solve to ensure the best possible educational experiences for exceptional children. Presently in British Columbia, significant changes are occurring in the format of service delivery to children with special learning needs. These changes have resulted in large measure from the recommendations of the 1988 Royal Commission on Education, the subsequent Year 2000 document and the Regular Education Initiative (REI) which is currently being debated in the United States (see Hallahan, Kauffman, Lloyd, & McKinney, 1988). In this environment of change it is timely that a systematic examination be undertaken of learning assistance. It is important to ask questions like: How is the learning assistance teachers' role changing? Is the collaborative/consultative model being accepted by members of the school staff? Do the learning assistance teachers and class teachers have concerns that need to be addressed?

Theoretical Framework

Changes in the service delivery of special education during the past decade have primarily been in terms of increasing the numbers of handicapped students in the educational mainstream. To support these students, the collaborative/consultative model has been introduced into school settings. Its aim is to facilitate the communication of teams of professionals as they work towards creative solutions to mutually defined problems. The major goal of collaborative consultation is "to provide comprehensive and effective programs for students with special needs within the most appropriate context, thereby

enabling them to achieve maximum constructive interaction with their non-handicapped peers " (Idol, Paolucci-Whitcomb, & Nevin, 1986, p.1).

This paper outlines a case study of two learning assistance centres which was designed in part to redress a lack of current information about the impact of changes in service delivery on this learning environment. These case studies examined in detail the changing role of the learning assistance teacher, the impact on the school staff of more remediation taking place in the regular classroom, and the concerns about the collaborative/consultation model held by learning assistance and regular classroom teachers. West & Idol's (1987) breakdown of the dimensions of school consultation research was adapted for use as a framework for the collection of data. The variables examined were: (a) input; (b) process, (c) situational variables, and (d) outcome variables. A summary list of the research variables considered is presented in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Method

Data were collected from two suburban schools, each serving approximately 350 students. The schools had twelve and fourteen teachers respectively, and a full-time or close to full-time learning assistance (LA) teacher. Each school drew from populations with average socio-economic level. Data collection was designed so that multiple sources of data would bear on each research variable. Such triangulation of data enhances the generalizability of case study research (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). Information pertaining to the categories in the research framework was collected in the following ways:

(a) By examining students' referral forms, assessment files, Individual Education Plans, progress reports, records of parent/teacher and teacher/teacher conferences, working files kept by the learning assistance teacher, other learning assistance centre paperwork, and all relevant school records.

(b) Through the focussed observation of LA teachers' daily work, including their formal and informal consultations with regular class teachers, interactions with students, and participation in school-based referral committees and staff meetings.

(c) By using structured interviews based on the research framework to gather further relevant information from the learning assistance teachers.

(d) Through the analysis of the responses made by teachers and administrators to a questionnaire and interview. The questionnaire asked for information regarding the perceived challenges of teaching special needs students, the benefits and barriers that these students offer to instruction in the regular classroom, and the teacher's or administrator's opinion of the collaborative-consultative model. Respondents were also given an opportunity to make further comments concerning integration, learning assistance, and the collaborative-consultative model if they so wished. The results of this interview are summarized in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

In all, two learning assistance teachers were followed through their schools days, two days a week for a period of two months. These teachers made all possible information concerning their roles available to the researchers. They also took part in a structured interview and questionnaire session at the close of the research project. Three school administrators, two specialist teachers of English as a second language, and 21 classroom teachers were also interviewed.

Results

A participant-observer approach (Borg & Gall, 1983) was used in this research. Both observers, who are also qualified teachers, had broad access to classrooms and meetings. This research resulted in the collection of a large amount of information. In this section, preliminary results across all variables of the research framework are presented in

relation to the three research questions: (a) How is the learning assistance teachers' role changing?; (b) Is the collaborative/consultative model being accepted by members of the school staff?; (c) Do the learning assistance teachers and class teachers have concerns about this model that need to be addressed?

How is the learning assistance teachers' role changing? Without doubt, the role of the learning assistance teacher is varied and demanding. The types of problems for which students are referred to the LA centre include speech and language difficulties, visual and/or auditory memory problems, poor motor skills, and academic difficulties in reading (decoding, vocabulary, and/or comprehension), writing, spelling, and mathematics. Students are also referred because of immaturity, distractibility, and dependent work habits.

The LA teacher attends all school based team meetings, grade level planning meetings, keeps extensive records, formulates individual education plans, and consults with class teachers, the principal, and parents regularly. Consultations take place in varying locations (LA centre, class room, staff room, hallways, washrooms, outside school premises) before, and after school, as well as during lunch time. The demands on learning assistance teachers' time are extreme.

Some of these demands have always been part of the job of learning assistance. Other pressures however, are a direct result of the implementation of the collaborative/consultative model. In general, the changes to LA teachers' roles can be grasped by realizing that these teachers have moved from working with a limited number of children on individual learning needs to positions of leadership within their schools. Through providing consultative support, LA teachers appear to be providing three key educational requirements: (a) support to teachers as they cope with an increased workload, (b) support in enabling classroom teachers to integrate the emotional and learning needs of the "whole" child, and (c) continued remediation of specific learning needs.

Support to teachers as they cope with an increased workload. Recent teacher contract negotiations have demanded lower class sizes and a limit of two special needs children per classroom. Bargaining considerations have centered on the issues of time constraints: after school time needed for meetings with support personnel, more in-class time needed to monitor special programs, and time spent to study special problems and implement more appropriate teaching strategies. Teachers in British Columbia have been overwhelmed by the sweeping educational changes that are a result of the Year 2000 recommendations. Many teachers are expected to plan for and attend meetings on ungraded primary programs, whole language, the writing process, teaching for higher thought, thematic approaches to planning, as well as to consult concerning mainstreaming special needs students into the regular class.

Time pressures have added to the stress on teachers, and made counselling a significant part of the LA teacher's role. Effective learning assistance teachers must walk the fine line of being active listeners, acute observers, and equal participants in the problem-solving process. A real challenge of their changing role is to foster the respect and credibility needed to influence program change, while actively empowering regular class teachers with the skills and attitudes necessary to work successfully with special needs children.

Integration of the emotional and learning needs of the "whole" child. Following many years of psychometric assessment and labelling of children to fit specific categories, LA teachers are doing fewer formal assessments for individuals and more informal testing in short pullout periods after larger scale informal assessments of entire classes. In the time they spend teaching, learning assistance specialists tend to be working with groups of students who have similar academic problems and strategy deficits in subject and skill areas like decoding, math ,writing, and spelling.

Formal assessments and referrals to and from special programs, however, do occur as a matter of course under the collaborative/consultative model of integration. In the case

of special needs students who are being newly integrated into the regular classroom, it should be remembered that these students have a school history based on formal assessment and labelling. The danger of this is that teachers may be reluctant to take ownership of the problems of special needs individuals if these students continue to be identified and defined by their exceptionalities. LA teachers in their supportive, yet expert, role could find classroom teachers becoming "learned helpless" when dealing with the challenge of children who have special needs.

Continuing to address specific skill needs. The focus of learning assistance has moved away from the direct teaching of students with academic difficulties to the provision of strategies which will enable both teachers and students to cope with the learning demands of the regular classroom. For example, instead of working on skill builders that attempt to increase the level of spelling or punctuation skills, students are being taught strategies for overviewing and outlining text materials (e.g. Deshler, Warner, Schumaker, & Alley, 1983). Instruction of this type is becoming the responsibility of regular classroom teachers. The importance of good communication between the LA teacher and class teachers is highlighted by such efforts to accommodate the needs of exceptional children.

In many instances, teachers are literally being asked to change the way they teach in order to accommodate individuals with special needs in their classrooms. A significant part of the LA teacher's role consists of encouraging and providing guidance for class teachers as they begin to modify their expectations of grade-level achievement, supervise individual education plans (I.E.P.s), use different learning materials and teaching techniques for some of the students in their class, provide for the oral administration of exams, etc. In general, class teachers are being urged to promote and preserve their students' positive self-images through modifications to content and methods of presentation.

Classroom teachers are also being asked to become involved with LA teachers in the provision of extended learning assistance services to other students in their school. In

one school studied, peer coaching programs have been effective in improving the reading skills of many second and third year primary youngsters, while individual peer tutoring has been used to target handwriting at the fourth year level, printing at the second year level, and the small motor integration problems of kindergarten students. Many of these programs are monitored by teacher, student, and/or parent volunteers.

A commitment to providing therapeutic support for special needs children on the part of the learning assistance teacher also includes respecting the basic right of each child to attain his/her highest possible degree of literacy. This right is becoming more difficult to safeguard under the current service delivery model, however, because the amount of time spent by the learning assistance teacher in the collaborative role limits the time left for specific remedial teaching. The learning assistance teachers interviewed for this research, felt that time for students to be taken out of their regular class is still necessary so that IEPs can be established, and behaviourally difficult or distractible children taught in an appropriate environment.

Is the integrated model being accepted by members of the school staff?

In general, the teachers interviewed felt the collaborative/consultative model had promise and was working satisfactorily in their schools, though many of them noted that finding the time to plan and consult with the LA teacher was difficult. This research also suggests that the LA teacher's personality traits (cooperativeness, emotional stability, empathy, flexibility, warmth, and understanding), years of teaching experience, and perceived expertise are important factors in establishing and running a successful LA centre using the collaborative/consultative model.

Of the 26 teachers interviewed, 20 (77%) indicated that they were positive about the integrated LAC model. Teachers liked the learning assistance teacher to instruct in the classroom because it removed the "mystery" from what happens in remedial instruction, and allowed all students to be present for subjects like social studies and science. Other advantages of the in-class delivery of service mentioned by teachers emphasised the

professional attitude and responsibilities of the classroom teachers. Teachers saw in-class learning assistance as a way for them (a) to assess the effectiveness of the LA program, (b) to keep primary responsibility for the learning of the student, and (c) to learn new teaching techniques and strategies.

Although mostly positive about the new learning assistance model, 42% of the teachers were not comfortable with certain features of it. 8 teachers (31%) agreed that pull-out programs may still be necessary for those students whose specific learning needs can only be met successfully by working in an environment with less distractions. Although the current model is generally accepted by school staff, 87% of the teachers noted that more time was required for it to work adequately. Three specific areas where more time was needed were identified: (a) time to consult; (b) time to plan; (c) and more time for learning assistance to take place in the classroom.

The other major need of the collaborative/consultative model which was identified by 11 teachers (42%) is the sharing of responsibility for planning, and the pooling of materials and ideas. Acknowledging the many other pressures on teachers today, the respondents suggested that teachers of the same grade should plan units and themes in collaboration with LA teachers. In this way coteaching and the incorporation of strategy interventions within the classroom can be facilitated.

Do the learning assistance teachers and class teachers have concerns that need to be addressed?

Throughout the interview, teachers expressed a number of concerns about the collaborative/consultation model which need to be acknowledged. Twenty individual teachers (77%) noted that more support for their changing role is necessary. Needs for more support which were articulated by teachers include more inservice and preservice training, more support staff and counselling time for schools, release time to consult with specialists, and attention to stress management for teachers.

A major factor contributing to the stress experienced by teachers seems to be the number of special needs students with behaviour problems in their classes. Teachers identified these students as the most challenging of all special needs students in general (62%), in terms of time (54%), and in terms of consulting (65%). When asked why children with behaviour problems are so challenging, the teachers described how these students adversely affect the classroom climate through their distracting, disruptive, and uncooperative conduct. They precipitate many meetings with parents, school counsellors, and principals, may require lunch time supervision, and in general drain teachers' energy. This is of considerable concern at a time when teachers are worried about dealing with the increasing demands of system-wide educational changes.

Seven teachers made elaborative comments concerning how they feel about the current demands being made of them. They expressed a desire for the pressures they are facing to be acknowledged by all specialists and administrators in their workplace. Further, they noted that learning assistance teachers, aides, tutors, and others in the classroom may put an apprehensive edge on teaching for some teachers. These comments remind us that consultation will work most fully in school systems which engender respect for the professional judgement of all staff members. The LA teacher can and should not force the the collaborative/consultative model into all classrooms immediately: Change takes time.

Teachers' concern that not enough time is available for the new model of learning assistance service delivery to work effectively was reiterated throughout the interview. This concern was also echoed by the learning assistance teachers who found the lack of time to consult particularly frustrating at report card time and shortly before parent interviews. With regard to the parents of special needs students, five classroom teachers noted that the collaborative/consultative model redefines the role that parents can play in their child's education. Parents need support from schools in the form of information sessions which outline the changes the collaborative/consultative model brings to their

children's schooling. One teacher from this group noted that,"The involvement of parents in their kids' education is effective. Teachers need their support. It should be a priority for schools."

The major frustration expressed by the LA teachers was their inability to give appropriate help to all the students who require it. The classroom teachers' direct involvement in the consultative model certainly helps spread the benefits of learning assistance to many students; however, there remain some children who require intense small group instruction from a specialist. As one LA teacher put it, "These students are functioning so far below grade level and with such a low degree of independence that there is little they can do in the classroom." While serving such children is a priority, it may leave other students who would also benefit from remedial help without it. LA teachers provide some guidance for these students through consultation and collaboration, with classroom teachers, but realistically they can only deal with a few of the possible problems students may have in different subject and skill areas.

To try to reach even more students with learning difficulties, LA teachers provide special in-service sessions which may, for example, concentrate on fostering teachers' awareness of learning disabilities. LA teachers also distribute important articles and teaching ideas, attend grade-level planning sessions, and conduct workshops for classroom teachers and/or other LA teachers. These professional responsibilities all require extra time, commitment, and necessitate paperwork. Both the learning assistance teachers observed in this study had developed some innovative ways of streamlining the paperwork associated with their referral, consulting, planning, timetabling, and professional development functions.

Just as regular teachers identified the need for support both in and out of the classroom, learning assistance teachers also agreed that support of their role is vital to its effectiveness. Both LA teachers felt adequately supported by their school administration and district staff. One LA teacher was, in fact, involved in providing professional

development for new learning assistance teachers in her school district. Previous research has found that a supportive organizational climate has an important influence on the effectiveness of learning assistance programs (Bossard & Gutkin, 1983).

Discussion

Given the vigorous debate in the United States regarding the Regular Education Initiative, and controversy in Canada about the collaborative/consultative model of special education delivery, this study is timely: It highlights teachers' opinions of the current shift in instructional delivery in the school setting and describes in detail the changing role of the learning assistance teacher. A qualitative, descriptive study of a small number of individuals such as this clearly cannot determine definitive relationships between variables. However, it can describe what happens when teachers begin to consult with their peers, thus breaking down the traditional norms of teacher autonomy (Lortie, 1975).

Collaboration and consultation between teachers is a difficult and delicate process. Before teachers can begin to share classrooms, observe each other working with special needs students, and provide constructive and specific feedback, they have to change how they think about what they do. Time-honoured traditions of teaching are at risk under the influence of the collaborative/consultative model . As Little (1987) puts it, "Close to the classroom is close to the bone" (p. 35). Teachers self-esteem and professional respect is on the line as they are being asked to expose how they teach and how they think about teaching to their peers (Gersten, Darch, Davis, & George, 1991).

In order to meet the challenge of change, both learning assistance and regular teachers need support and consideration. They need support in terms of time: Time for consulting, sharing ideas, responsibilities, and decisions, and time to adjust to new demands and pressures. All teachers also need support in terms of ongoing inservice training. West (1985) found that most regular and special educators receive little or no preservice or inservice training in consulting skills. This situation has changed, but it has

to change even more, particularly with regards to preservice education, if models like the REI and the collaborative/consultative model are to succeed in our schools.

Perhaps an intensive apprenticeship model for the training of consulting teachers is one way of supporting LA teachers in their new position of leadership within their schools. Such a model was studied by Gersten et al. (1991) who concluded that merely appointing experienced teachers to consulting roles will not automatically make them skilled consultants. These researchers observed that learning assistance teachers who are not adequately trained in how to consult "will tend to shy away from specific feedback and 'escape' by providing broad, general feedback to teachers, or retreat to the never-ending world of paperwork" (p 235). Gersten et al's findings also demonstrated that, despite initial reluctance and resistance many class teachers crave specific feedback on what they are doing in their classrooms, particularly with regards to special needs students. Both the teachers studied would have much to offer "apprentice" LA teachers by virtue of their professional commitment, experiences in dealing with learning problems, diverse backgrounds (including counselling, psychometric testing, and district consultant roles), good communication skills, and personal qualities of warmth, empathy, approachability, straightforwardness, understanding, and patience.

Learning assistance and regular teachers also need consideration in order to meet the challenges of the collaborative/consultation model. The pressures on classroom teachers today should be acknowledged by parents, the public, and those within the school system. In a climate of educational change, teachers are being asked to take on many and varied responsibilities. Ministry officials and district administrators should be reminded of the pitfalls of hasty implementation of programs (see Huefner, 1988). In relation to the REI, Newcomer (1989) writes of a situation that many involved in education fear:

> The task confronting educators today is awesome. The problems presented by an ever-increasing number of "typical" children challenge the skill of even the most talented and dedicated regular classroom teacher. And, many teachers are neither

> dedicated nor talented -- a sad, but true fact that is directly related to the value our society places on teaching as a career. However, even when we assume competence and consider only the best among educators, there is a realistic limit to what can be expected of a regular classroom teacher. . . . Probably, good teachers will respond to increased responsibility by doing their best for their students and will burn out a bit faster. The response that can be expected from the less-than good teachers strains the imagination and depresses the spirit! (p. 155)

The teachers interviewed in this research were clear about the category of special needs student that they find most challenging and least rewarding to teach: behaviour problems. Teachers are asking for consideration regarding the selection of special needs students for integration into the regular class. It should be recognized that children who have behaviour problems with or without special needs present a particularly difficult set of challenges to the classroom teacher and to her other students. In fact, three teachers who were interviewed stated explicitly that the only special needs students who do not benefit the class in some way (by fostering acceptance of individual differences, increasing understanding and tolerance, etc) are those with behaviour problems. If children with behaviour problems are present in the regular class, adequate support for meeting the challenges posed by these students should be ensured.

If the role of the regular classroom teacher is considered difficult and challenging, then the role of the learning assistance teacher is almost Herculean. Is it possible to meet the demands associated with the job? This study has examined instances where programs are working well. The learning assistance teacher holds an increasingly important position in our schools, however, and the personal consequences of this demanding job are becoming all too evident in the high attrition rate among LA teachers. The combined pressures of stress, excessive paperwork, and meetings in every spare minute of the day cause many teachers to leave learning assistance after as little as twelve months on the job (Dangel, Bunch, & Coopman, 1987).

Overall, this examination of the collaborative/consultation model has yielded both observations which require further discussion, and topics for follow-up studies. Future research into consulting and the collaborative/consultative model should, at the very least, include (a) a needs assessment of consultative skills; (b) an investigation of the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and personality characteristics of successful consultants and consultees; and (c) an examination of the importance of the time factor in consulting with a view to establishing guidelines for the most time-efficient consultation practices.

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Table 1. Framework for the collection of data

INPUT VARIABLES	PROCESS VARIABLES
Consultant characteristics/LAteacher	Consultation model
Consultee characteristics	Consultation techniques/styles
Client/Student characteristics	Consultation stage
Nature of problem presented	Individual vs group
Demography	Referral procedures
	Contracts for service
	Competencies for LA teachers
	Collegial consultation

SITUATIONAL VARIABLES	OUTCOME VARIABLES
Time	Teacher behaviour/attitudes
Location	Student behaviour/attitudes
Organizational	Organizational/system change
Learning environment	Evaluation

Table 2. Three most common responses from teachers for each questionnaire item

1a. Do you have a mainstreamed/special needs student in your class this year?

22 learning disabled (LD)
6 severe LD (SLD)
15 severe behavior
13 ESL

1b. Have you had a mainstreamed/special needs student in your class in the past?

11 learning disabled (LD)
5 SLD
11 severe behaviour
1 ESL

1c. Which classification of special needs student was most challenging to you?
i. in general

16 behaviour problems
3 LD
2 SLD
ii. in terms of time
14 behaviour problems
4 LD
2 SLD
iii. in terms of planning
9 LD
3 SLD
6 behaviour problems
iii. in terms of consulting
17 behaviour problems
3 LD
2 SLD

2. How has the presence of a special needs students benefitted your classroom?

8 learn from each other
7 awareness of individual difs.
5 increase tolerance

3. How has the presence of a special needs student presented barriers to the smooth operation of your classroom?

13 time restraints
8 influences what can be done with the whole class
3 noise/classroom tone

4. From your experience, what changes would you recommend be made to next year's program in terms of support from learning assistance?

15 more time
5 coplanning, sharing ideas
4 more support for teachers

5. What changes do you think need to be made to improve the consultative model in your school?

20 more time (esp. to consult)
6 coplanning, sharing ideas
4 consulting schedule

6. Do you have any other comments to make?

11 need more support for teachers and parents
3 would like more LAC time
3 need acknowledgement of the pressures on teachers today.

Note: 26 teachers were interviewed. The numbers here refer to the total number of teachers who responded similarly to each item on the questionnaire.